

The Tanana Yukon Valley

A BRIEF HISTORY

Prepared by Members and Friends of the
TANANA YUKON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
P. O. Box 1794, Fairbanks, Alaska 99707



The Richardson Highway near Fairbanks (circa 1923).

(Eleanor Reed Collection)

"DENA" – "THE PEOPLE"

The Interior portion of Alaska has been occupied for thousands of years by American Indians who speak the Athabaskan language. Speakers of this language are found throughout northern Canada as far east as Hudson Bay. They are closely related to the southern Athabascans, the Navaho and Apache. They do not usually refer to themselves as "Athabascans," but in their language speak of themselves as "Dena," "people" or "us." No one is certain when their ancestors arrived in the New World or from whence they migrated. Archaeologists estimate that the influx of people into North America via the Bering Land Bridge may have begun as early as 40,000 years ago. Perhaps there were waves of migrants. From recent finds at Healy Lake, one can trace a direct line of descent from 10,000 years ago down to the men who met the first white men entering Alaska.

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The impact of the Euroamericans was felt long before they were seen in the Interior of Alaska. Trade goods such as firearms and metal objects were traded inland from the coast in the 19th Century. It is quite possible that the epidemics that swept other parts of Alaska in the early 1800's also took the lives of many Interior peoples long before the traders and missionaries set foot in the Yukon and Tanana valleys. When the newcomers did arrive they did not find any large, centrally controlled "tribes." Instead, there were scattered bands of hunters each of which was an independent unit, but with a feeling of relatedness to their neighboring bands. They considered themselves to be clearly distinct from their more recent coastal neighbors, the Eskimos.

At contact time, the Indians of the Interior lived by hunting and fishing. On the lower reaches of the Tanana, where fishing was comparatively good, they hunted caribou and moose throughout the winter, but in summer spent a good deal of their time on the small rivers fishing. Nets and fishtraps were used on the small rivers. The fishwheel, seen along the rivers today, was introduced into the region just after the turn of the century, about 1902. The early French term for the Indians in this region was "Gens de Buttes" – "People of the hills" – because they were known to spend much of their time searching the hills for food. In addition to the caribou and moose they also hunted bear, wolves, beaver, muskrats, lynx, grouse, ptarmigan and waterfowl.

To survive, the Indians had to be constantly on the move throughout most of the year. They used skin tents in the winter, and in summer constructed temporary shelters at the fishing sites. Their material culture was limited because they had to transport everything they owned either on their backs or on sleds. There was not a great deal of graphic art such as one finds in other parts of Alaska. Instead, the Tanana people invested their artistic abilities in songs and dances. Their way of life is often reflected in the old songs, dances and stories. For example, many stories begin with "A man was traveling along one day . . ." Subsistence, economy, songs, religious beliefs all tied in together to form a culture, a way of life. But in the same way that one upsets a whole spider web by simply changing one strand, so the intricate culture of the past began to change even before the white men arrived. Metal and firearms began to replace the caribou surrounds or fences. Whereas it took close group cooperation to live in the old way, the new technology introduced a new form of individualism, and social organization began to break down.

The Canadians moved northward down the MacKenzie River and then down the Porcupine and established Fort Yukon in 1847. To the west, the Russians had established a redoubt at Nulato nearly ten years earlier. The Tanana Indians visited Fort Yukon in 1868 and were described by William Dall, but no white men entered the Tanana Valley until the 1870's. It was only with the gold rush of 1902 that the newcomers swarmed into the valley. Steamboats began moving along the Tanana and Yukon Rivers and villages began to spring up along these new avenues of communication. Just after the turn of the century, a telegraph line was constructed from Valdez to Eagle and was later extended the length of the Tanana Valley. The Richardson Highway from Valdez to Fairbanks was cut through the new territory. In 1915 the railroad from Seward to Fairbanks was begun. Each new route stimulated the rise of new villages. Some settlements arose as trading posts, others started as gateways to the gold fields. Missions and schools caused other villages to grow up around them. Today, every village in the Interior has its own history and reason for existence. The development of villages caused new problems. In the old days, the Indians were constantly on the move

hunting and fishing, exploiting their territory as best they could. Under pressure from the missionaries and local administrators, they settled in permanent villages so that they might have the advantages of modern trade and education for their children. In settled villages, they could no longer support themselves. For a few years they earned some income cutting wood for the steamboats, and fur trapping was profitable until the 1930's. But while gold miners were staking out claims and making laws and regulations, the Indians were not even recognized as full-fledged citizens until 1924.

At a conference in Fairbanks in 1915, the Tanana chiefs elected not to go on reservations. Judge Wickersham had suggested that they might set up a few reservations at key sites in the valley. At the time there seemed to be a great deal of land available so that white men and Indians could live side by side and the two ways of life could continue. The Indians did not want to be tied down to one plot of land and turned into farmers or settlers. For thousands of years they had been hunters and gatherers, and farming on 160 acres was not the way to make a living in the Interior of Alaska!

Again in 1922, the Spanish flu took the lives of many Indians. Whole villages were wiped out. Many fled back into the hills to avoid the disease. They managed to survive by hunting and trapping. Then the fur market dropped with the depression of the 1930's. The remnants of the various bands grouped up in villages like Minto and Tanacross, in Nenana and Fairbanks. Healy Lake, Chena and Salchacket all died out. They are now deserted sites.

The 1940's and World War II marked a turning point in the history of the Tanana Valley. The Alcan Highway was pushed through from Canada to Fairbanks. Large airfields were constructed at Northway and Tanacross to accommodate the U. S. planes that were ferried to Russia via Alaska. Many of the Indians worked at construction jobs and some entered military service. But since many villages of the Interior did not have schools until the 1930's, many of the older people remained illiterate. There was much more intensive and continuous contact with the new and ever-changing American culture. However, many were not equipped to compete in the new society because they had never had an opportunity to learn the new and necessary skills.

With the close of World War II, the Alaskan economy entered a new slump. The boom was over and many resorted to simple subsistence hunting and fishing and welfare to survive. At the same time, a new effort was made to provide secondary education for the native students by taking them out of the village for high school and placing them in boarding schools in Southeastern Alaska and Oregon. This brought about further changes in the old culture because in many villages the young people no longer spoke Athabascan. Separated from their villages and families throughout the school year, the young people did not learn many of the old customs and traditions and much of the oral history was lost.

The mid-1960's witnessed a renewed interest in the old culture on the part of the young. It appears that the interest in the land claims triggered off a new interest in the past. Today one can find many well-informed, militant and proud Indians who assert their right to be an integral part of this valley. Originally, it was their valley.

There is no comprehensive history of the area. It remains to be written. But when it is, a major contribution can be made by seeing it not only in terms of the newcomers – the prospectors, trappers, adventurers and sourdoughs – but also through the eyes of "Dena" – "The People."

– Wallace Olson

CHRONOLOGY

- 1833 Lt. Tebankof, a Russian naval officer, built Redoubt St. Michael near the mouth of a river called by the Eskimos "Kuikpak" – "kuik" for river and "pak" for large – henceforth called the Yukon.
- 1834 Andrei Glazunov, a half-Russian, half-native traveling overland from St. Michael, was the first white man to sight the river, where the Anvik River joins the Yukon, 325 miles from its mouth.
- 1836-7 The Russian American Company established its first trading post on the Yukon at IKOGMUT, now known as Russian Mission.
- 1840 Robert Campbell, Hudson's Bay Company employee, discovered the headwaters of the Yukon, which he named the "Pelly River." As late as 1851 a supposition existed that the river emptied into the Arctic Ocean near Point Barrow.
- 1847 The Hudson's Bay Company established Fort Yukon, marking the beginning of British advances against Russia's American holdings.
- 1851 Natives stormed the Yukon River post of Nulato, killing most of the residents and mortally wounding Lt. Bernard, an officer from HMS Enterprise, who had been dispatched there for the purpose of investigating rumors that survivors or remains of members of the Sir John Franklin Expedition were located on the Koyukuk River.
- 1865 The Russian American Western Union Expedition was organized for the purpose of constructing a telegraph line between Portland, Oregon and St. Petersburg, Russia. Bannister, Dall and Kennicott, members of the expedition, were the first white men to penetrate the Interior of Alaska and report on the resources of Russian America.
- 1869 Hudson's Bay Company interests at Fort Yukon were purchased by the Alaska Commercial Company after Captain Raymond, U.S. Engineers, determined the fort was 80 miles inside U.S. territory.
- 1883 Lt. Schwatka, USA, explored the Yukon River, drifting from its headwaters on a raft for 1300 miles – the longest raft journey in the interest of geological science ever made up to the time.
- 1885 Tanana River Valley explored by Lt. Henry Allen, USA.
- 1886 The first gold creek placer mines on the American portion of the Yukon River were discovered on Fortymile Creek, forty miles down the Yukon from Fort Reliance, a Canadian trading post.
- 1890 The population of Alaska was estimated to be nearly 34,000.
- 1900 Alaska was granted civil government, with institutions and judicial and other officials. Mr. James Wickersham was the first District Judge of the District Court established at Eagle. The area of the district was enormous, extending from the Arctic Coast to Attu. The white population was less than 1500. The area contained four log churches. There were no public wagon roads or trails, and no court house, jail, public buildings, or schools. The court was authorized to construct a court house, with the cost not to exceed \$5,000 – to be paid from license fees when collected by the court.



The Interior's first court house and jail located at EAGLE. The court house, jail, customs house and horse barns, and the remains of Fort Egbert (1899-1911) are open to visitors. Designated historic site in 1970. (U of A Museum Photo)



Fairbanks (circa 1907) was established when Capt. E. T. Barnette, a trader, debarked from the Riverboat Lavelle Young (pilot wheel located in Pioneer Museum, Alaskaland), and established a trading post near the present site of First and Barnette on August 26, 1901. First called "Barnette's Cache," the name was changed in 1902 to honor Charles Warren Fairbanks, 1852-1918, Senator from Indiana and later Vice President under Theodore Roosevelt. The town began as the supply center for the mining region to its north after gold was discovered by Felix Pedro. Monument located southwest corner Cushman Street Bridge.

(U of A Museum Photo)

1902 Felix Pedro discovered gold twelve miles above the present site of Fairbanks. A monument built in his memory is located near the discovery claim along the Steese Highway.

1905 The Tanana Valley Railroad was completed, carrying freight and passengers between Chena, Fairbanks, Fox, Gilmore, Olnes, Chatanika and other mining camps. The road was sold to the U. S. government in 1917. The narrow gauge portion servicing the camps was abandoned in 1930. Engine No. 1 is located at Alaskaland.

1907 The Valdez Trail to Fairbanks was passable by dog-



Chena as it appeared during the early part of the century. Located 7 miles southwest of Fairbanks, the area is now a campground.

(U of A Museum Photo)

sled and packtrain. The Richardson Highway was later built over this route.

1910 The first wagon was drawn over the Valdez Trail to Fairbanks.

1913 The first airplane flight in Alaska was made at Fairbanks from a ball park located near the present site of Wien Park. The pilot attempted to sell the machine in Fairbanks to a trapper or prospector as a replacement for dog transportation.

1914 Congress authorized construction of a railroad from Seward to Fairbanks. Construction was begun at once.



Cleary, established in 1904, was located approximately 26 miles north of Fairbanks on the Steese Highway. Only a cabin and cemetery remain to remind us of its existence.

(U of A Museum Photo)

1915 The cornerstone of the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines, later to become the University of Alaska (July 1, 1935), was laid on July 4, 1915 at College, Alaska. The college opened in 1922 with six students. The University has a fine museum which is open daily and exhibits pre-historic Indian and Eskimo cultures, biological collections, remnants of the Russian occupation and a wide range of Gold Rush memorabilia.

1920 Improvement of the Valdez Trail to Fairbanks, now known as the Richardson Highway, was begun, with the object of making the route good enough for motor traffic.

1923 Completion of the Alaska Railroad was marked when President Harding drove a golden spike at the north end of the Nenana River bridge on July 15.

1924 The first government contract was let for carrying airmail in Alaska. The route was from Fairbanks to McGrath; the pilot, the late Colonel Carl Ben Eielson. The air time on the route was two hours and forty-five minutes, as compared to seventeen days by dog team. Noel Wien made the first flight between Anchorage and Fairbanks and crossed the Arctic Circle – another first.

1942 The Alaska Highway was officially completed December 1, 1942, less than nine months after it was started. Tourist travel commenced in February, 1948 when all travel restrictions were lifted.

1954 The sternwheeler Nenana made her last cargo run to Fort Yukon and back to Nenana. She was built in Seattle and dismantled and shipped piece by piece by freighter and the Alaska Railroad to Nenana on the Tanana River. After reassembly, she made her maiden voyage down the river in 1934. The Nenana was great and powerful, but slow, and was replaced by faster diesel towboats. See at Alaskaland.



Steam navigation on the Yukon River was initiated in 1869 by the Alaska Commercial Company. In 1913 one company serviced the Yukon and Tanana River camps with 42 stern-wheelers and 54 barges.

(Chas. G. Mayre Collection)

1955 The State of Alaska Constitutional Convention convened at the University of Alaska November 8, 1955 and continued to February 6, 1956. Alaska was admitted to the Union as the 49th State on January 3, 1959.

1967 Alaska Purchase Centennial celebrated at Fairbanks with the establishment of Alaskaland, Igloo Number Four's museum, pioneer cabins, old mining equipment, the sternwheeler Nenana, Tanana Valley Railroad's engine No. 1., and the Big Stampede, a series of 15 murals portraying the discovery of gold in the North. The Big Stampede is the work of well-known artist C. "Rusty" Heurlin.



The scene above is representative of "turn-of-the-century" mines which were located on gold bearing creeks of Alaska's Interior.

(Photo, Eleanor Reed Collection)

PLACER MINING IN INTERIOR ALASKA

The early history of Interior Alaska is essentially that of placer mining. In 1873 two parties, headed by Arthur Harper and Jack McQuesten, reached the Yukon basin via the MacKenzie route, a gruelling journey of continental proportions. These men traded, trapped, and prospected with indifferent success. Perhaps the next happening of importance was the discovery of gold at Juneau in 1880. Although this was not in Interior Alaska, it provided an industry and brought men to a convenient jumping off place for the Interior.

After 1880, more and more men penetrated the Interior via the upper Yukon, and in 1886 they found gold in the Fortymile River, near the Canadian border. In 1893, two more gold districts, or "camps" were discovered. These were Birch Creek, the present Circle District, and the Rampart District, also near the Yukon River, about 100 miles downstream. Interior Alaska, which had remained practically a void well into modern times, was awaiting a spark to spring into life.

That spark came in 1896, at a place called Rabbit Creek — later Bonanza Creek — near the Klondike River on the upper Yukon in Canada. By winter 1896, Circle was deserted, and by spring, 1898, 30,000 people were in the new town of

Dawson. Almost everyone who arrived later than 1897 found nothing, but most were Americans, and spread out over Alaska in a sixteen-year hunt that found every placer gold camp and most of the hardrock deposits in Alaska. If we consider only those in Interior Alaska and the Yukon, the list looks like this:

Fortymile (1886); Circle (1893); Rampart (1893); Klondike (1896); Manley Hot Springs (1902); Fairbanks (1902); Bonnifield (1903); Kantishna (1905); Tenderfoot (1906); Innoko (1906-07); Ruby (1907); Iditarod (1909); Chisana (1912); Marshal, lower Yukon (1913) and Tolovana-Liven-good (1914).

By 1920, gold production in the largest district, Fairbanks, had fallen to half a million dollars per year and it had all the appearance of a ghost town. In 1924, the Alaska Railroad was built; dredge parts, coal, draglines, and later the new bulldozers were brought in, and the Interior had a new lease on life. The last dredge in the Fairbanks area shut down in 1964 as a result of rising operating costs and the unchanged price of gold.

— Ernie Wolff



Bob Griffin Mail Carry leaving Bluff, Alaska.

(Photo, Eleanor Reed Collection)

DOG TEAM MAIL HAUL

The following is from the September 17, 1900 issue of the *Nome Daily Chronicle*: Washington, August 27. — The post office department has given a contract to the Canadian Development Company, Ltd., to carry letter mail from Skagway to St. Michael and Nome from December 1 next to March 31 next. The route will be via Dawson, Forty-Mile, Eagle, Circle City, Rampart, Tanana, Koyukuk, Nulato and Eaton, Alaska, a distance of 1603 miles each way, with a branch from Eaton to Nome, 240 miles each way.

On the main line there are to be two round trips a month, leaving Skagway on the 8th and 22d of each month, running time not to exceed sixty days each way between Skagway and St. Michael. Also between Skagway and Nome.

GEOLOGIC HISTORY OF THE TANANA-YUKON AREA

Interior Alaska is divided into three geographic areas. The *Yukon Flats* extend along the Yukon River from Circle to Stevens Village where the river enters the narrow Rampart Trough. South of the Yukon Flats is the broad *Yukon-Tanana Upland* which extends from the Alaska-Canada border to the Yukon River and Rampart Trough on the west. Farther south lies the long, arcuate *Tanana-Kuskokwim Lowland*, which is in turn bordered to the south by the northern foothills of the Alaska Range.

Permafrost underlies most of the Yukon Flats which were, apparently, the site of a large lake some 3 to 5 million years ago. Sediment accumulation from windblown sands and shifting river channels has been the main geologic event during the past several million years in this region. The Yukon Flats, as well as the Tanana-Kuskokwim Lowlands, escaped glaciation during the great Ice Age, although short valley glaciers appeared on the higher parts of the Tanana-Yukon Uplands.

A belt of Paleozoic marine sediments and volcanic rocks ranging in age from 230 to 600 million years is exposed along the northern side of the Yukon-Tanana Upland. Numerous volcanic eruptions took place in this region during Paleozoic time. Bending, warping and faulting have subsequently greatly deformed these rocks. The majority of the Uplands, however, is composed of even older rock, the Birch Creek Schist, which is commonly exposed in the hills around Fairbanks. The schists were once marine sediments more than 600 million years ago. Heat and pressure associated with deep burial has since recrystallized the sediments forming micas and other shiny and silvery appearing minerals. Vast uplift and erosion has since taken place exposing these ancient rocks at the earth's surface. Scattered granitic rocks in the Uplands were formed during the Mesozoic Era some 63 to 230 million years ago. Aqueous solutions associated with these granitic intrusions penetrated fractures in the older rocks depositing quartz veins with gold and other ore minerals.

As the Uplands were deeply eroded during Cenozoic time, 63 to 3 million years ago, the gold bearing rocks were exposed and the gold was transported downslope to be concentrated in river gravels close to its point of origin. During the last 2 or 3 million years, glaciers in the Alaska Range have furnished vast quantities of fine rock flour to the Tanana River. This silt has been blown northward onto the Uplands where it sifted down among plant roots to form a thick layer of "loess" on top of the older rocks. The loess is exposed in many road cuts and is perennially frozen (permafrost) in many places, especially on north facing slopes and in poorly drained areas. The famous gold placer deposits of the region are located in the old stream gravels beneath considerable thicknesses of windblown silt which has been transported downslope to the valley bottoms. This transported silt is called "muck" by the miners because it is soupy when melted and has a strong smell from the decaying plant and animal remains that it contains. Bones of Ice Age mammals including mammoth, mastodon, bison, horse and others have been recovered from the "muck" during the thawing and hydraulicking operations of gold mining.

During Cenozoic time, 63 to 3 million years ago, the Tanana-Kuskokwim Lowland was also higher in elevation and furnished sediment to the coal fields of the Healy area and elsewhere along the present northern foothills of the Alaska Range. Subsequently the rapidly rising Alaska Range, which began to form about 5 to 8 million years ago, shed coarse

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gravels to the north which were deposited in large coalescing outwash fans. These fans are clearly visible in flight between Anchorage and Fairbanks. As a result of this outpouring of sediment northward from the Alaska Range, the Tanana River has been pushed toward the northern wall of its valley. In the southwestern portion of the Lowland, fields of stabilized sand dunes testify to the presence of much windblown sediment during the Pleistocene Ice Age when the main rivers were choked with glacial debris. Dense clouds of windblown glacial rock flour can still be seen arising from the braided channel of the Tanana River on stormy days. Almost the entire Tanana-Kuskokwim Lowland is underlain by permafrost; highways are difficult to maintain due to repeated frost heaving in these permafrost areas.

In 1886, gold was found in stream placer deposits in the Fortymile River area near the Canadian border. During subsequent years, gold from the nine most productive camps in the region amounted to about 11,870,000 ounces valued at about \$330,000,000.

— Richard Allison

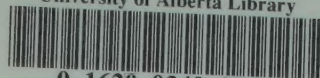


Weeks Field, Fairbanks, Alaska — Circa 1930
(Photo, Eleanor Reed Collection)



Trapper's Cabin
(Chas. G. Mayre Photo)

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